

5. The Jews had no idea what they were in for when they confronted Jesus concerning this Sabbath healing. They likely expected Him to respond in rabbinical fashion with some musing on the Law which legitimized His actions as falling within the parameters of what was permissible on the Sabbath. Instead of drawing on rabbinical interpretations of the Law and its authority, He claimed *personal* authority to do what He'd done. Even more, He insisted that *Israel's God* gave Him this authority as His Father. And, so far from trying to justify the healing as not constituting "work," Jesus acknowledged that He *was* working on the Sabbath, but just as His Father was. Indeed, His work was His Father's work, for His Father sent Him into the world to do the very things He was doing. This healing of a lame man was His Father's work, but there was far greater work to come. For the Father hadn't sent Him to heal men's mortal bodies, but to restore the whole human person; the work the Father appointed to Him was to give life to the world.

These Jewish rulers got far more than they were expecting and they must have been reeling from what they heard. Jesus' claims were so spectacular and outrageous that it was hard to know where to begin to confront His heresy and blasphemy. Evidently, their first instinct was to falsify His claims by drawing upon another component of the Mosaic Code, namely the *law of witnesses*: Jesus could assert whatever He wanted, but His claims were illegitimate and not to be accepted as true because they were uncorroborated; He was bearing witness of Himself. John didn't say that Jesus' accusers actually raised this objection, but His defense indicates that they did (5:31; cf. 8:12-13).

The law of witnesses actually pertained to crimes and transgressions; it was intended to protect the innocent from false accusation, not authenticate truth claims as such. The point of the law was that the mere accusation of wrongdoing (murder, sexual violation, etc.) was insufficient to convict the accused; there had to be corroborating evidence in the form of other witnesses (cf. Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:1-7, 19:15-21). But centuries of rabbinical interaction with the law evidently enlarged its scope to include all truth claims: Corroborating witnesses were now required to substantiate any claim about any matter. No doubt this rule wasn't applied universally and even-handedly, but it was a useful tool for those determined to control legal proceedings and outcomes. The law of witnesses was but one example of those wielding the authority of the Law employing the Law – with the appearance of submission to it – in the service of their own power and agenda. But such disingenuous use of law wasn't unique to the Jews; lawlessness in the name of law is fundamental to human existence under the fall. Whether at the personal, societal or governmental level, hypocrisy is the tribute which vice pays to virtue.

The Jewish rulers were not about to accept Jesus' words as true; to do so would be to concede their own error respecting the Scriptures and the man standing in front of them – the man they were determined to eliminate as a subversive false messiah. But even more, Jesus' claims threatened their very authority and the power structures which served them so well. They needed to delegitimize Him in the sight of the people and that meant falsifying His claims. Pitting Jesus against the Law of Moses – and making themselves the Law's jealous adherents – was the best way to accomplish this end. They could try to debunk each of Jesus' claims individually, but the easiest path to their goal was to negate them collectively by citing the absence of corroborating witnesses.

- a. Jesus began by acknowledging the contention that His testimony alone didn't validate His claims (5:31). Taken at face value, this might seem to suggest that He agreed with this position. Jesus didn't need witnesses to substantiate His claims *as such*, but inasmuch as they indicated blasphemy or a posture of disobedience to the Law, witnesses were necessary to prove His guilt or innocence. By His statement Jesus was neither admitting His need for witnesses nor conceding that His testimony lacked integrity; rather, He was speaking to the prevailing belief that, being charged with sabbath-breaking and blasphemy, the Law required that witnesses be called to corroborate or refute His claims and so establish the truth. In reality, Jesus didn't need human witnesses because He knew who He was, who had sent Him and the work He was undertaking (ref. 8:12-14). And yet, He had witnesses – witnesses whose integrity and testimony were impeachable.
- b. *John the Baptist* was the first witness Jesus cited in His defense (5:33-35, cf. 3:33). (Some believe Jesus was referring to the Father in 5:32, others believe it was to John.) John was the ideal first witness because he was well-known in Israel and many believed him to be a true prophet (ref. Matthew 21:23-26). And John's testimony to Jesus as Yahweh's Messiah was the very marrow of His prophetic witness (cf. again Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18 with John 1:19-37, 3:22-36). John's prophetic ministry was centered in his baptizing activity, which was oriented toward *repentance*: He called the people of Israel to rethink their presuppositions and convictions regarding the Messiah and the kingdom Yahweh had promised in connection with His coming (5:33). John's baptism testified of Jesus in two important ways: First, as a baptism of repentance it highlighted Israel's alienation from God and refocused the people's messianic expectation. But it also directed that sharpened focus toward Jesus Himself, particularly in connection with His public baptism and John's introduction of Him.

Among all possible witnesses to Jesus' claims, John was the most obvious and most recognizable. None of Jesus' accusers that day could have argued otherwise. They may not have liked John or agreed with his testimony, but they couldn't deny that he was a solid witness on behalf of the accused. John was above reproach in his devotion to God and his witness concerning Jesus was consistent and uncompromised. By and large, the people of Israel believed John to be a true prophet of God; if they had doubts about Jesus and His work, perhaps John's witness to Him would lead them to repentance and faith (v. 34b).

Jesus Himself affirmed John's integrity and the veracity of his testimony (cf. Matthew 11:2-11, 21:23-32), and yet He set John's testimony in its proper context (5:34-35); John was a truthful witness, but as a *man*. Thus a notable irony: Jesus' accusers were concerned with *human* witnesses; indeed they would seek just such witnesses for themselves were they to come under accusation and they expected Jesus to do the same. But here He was presenting a human witness on His behalf even while discounting him. Jesus' point is clear: Men look to other men to attest what is true. But, for His part, though He was willing to draw upon human testimony, He recognized that it is neither the best nor the most reliable.

John was a truthful witness to Jesus – a “shining light” in Israel, but an *imperfect* and *transient* one (5:35); his insight into Jesus the Messiah and His work and kingdom were limited by where he stood in God’s scheme. John was the last and greatest of the prophets of the preparatory salvation history, but for this very reason he was less than the least one *in* the kingdom (ref. again Matthew 11:2-15).

c. The Baptizer was the prophesied Isaianic forerunner chosen to herald the Messiah and His kingdom and thus his testimony played a critical role in God’s purposes. His ministration laid the foundation for the faith and salvation of many in Israel (ref. again 1:35-51, 3:22-36; also Luke 3:1-18). John’s witness was true, but it was not the most significant one. In Jesus’ estimation, His *works* were a greater corroborating witness to His claims (5:36). This was itself a radical claim, for a person’s actions do not provide *independent*, third-party testimony since they are his own. But Jesus could cite His works as an independent witness precisely because they didn’t originate with Him, but were commissioned by His Father (cf. 9:1-5, 10:22-38, 15:18-25, etc.). His works, therefore, corroborated two of the claims at the heart of His defense:

- Israel’s God had sent Him into the world with a specific mission and His works were purposefully orchestrated to attest and advance that mission.
- So Jesus’ Sabbath healing that day was set within and testified to His messianic calling. It, like everything He said and did, was directed by His commitment to fulfill His Father’s will in the world.

This points to the important truth that the witness of Jesus’ works didn’t reside principally in their miraculous nature, but in the way they corresponded to and connected Him with the Scriptures and their promise of the messianic age and kingdom. Many have argued otherwise, claiming that supernaturalism was precisely the issue with Jesus’ works, for His design in them was to prove to Israel that He is the *divine* Son of God. By doing miraculous deeds, Jesus could command people’s attention and compel them to acknowledge His deity and so yield to Him in faith. (This thinking underlies the evangelistic philosophy which holds that “signs and wonders” are the primary means God ordained for leading people to faith in Christ. John Wimber, one of the founders of the Vineyard movement, popularized this view in his 1980’s book, *Power Evangelism*.)

It’s true that the Jews of Jesus’ day believed miraculous signs authenticated God’s prophets, but Jesus rebuked this orientation and the notion that supernatural works would lead people to faith (cf. 2:13-25, 3:1-3, 6:1-36 with Matthew 12:38-45, 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 16:19-31). Paul later took the same position with the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:18-24). Jesus’ intent in His works wasn’t to manifest miraculous power per se, but to link Himself with the prophetic picture of the messianic era and kingdom – a time of supernatural intervention and renewal (cf. Isaiah 35, 57:15-19, 61:1-3; Jeremiah 30:1-22, 33:1-16; Ezekiel 34, 37:1-14, 47:1-12; Hosea 6:1-3; Malachi 4; etc. with Matthew 8:14-17, 11:2-6; Luke 4:16-21).

- d. As noted, some argue that Jesus had His Father in mind in verse 32. Whether or not that was the case, He did specifically identify the Father in verses 37-38 as one of His corroborating witnesses. The Jews' accusation was grounded in the premise that Jesus' healing work indicted Him as a lawbreaker; His response was that His works actually vindicated Him because they were works ordained by His Father and works which the Father Himself was doing (ref. again 5:19). But if Jesus' works testified on His behalf, then so did the Father who was working through Him. And if Jesus' works provided a greater witness than that of John, the Father's testimony transcended them both (cf. 1 John 5:9).

Jesus' Father – the One whom His accusers worshipped as their God and Father – bore witness to His Son through the Son's words and works, but this testimony fell upon deaf ears. The very fact that Israel's religious elite stood there that day confronting and accusing Jesus proved the point.

- They would be the first to acknowledge that they had never heard Yahweh's voice or seen His form (5:37b); this singular privilege had largely been reserved for the patriarchs and prophets. There was no indictment or shame in this admission. But now Yahweh was working in a new way; now, in the person of His Son, He was present among them so that they – and all men – could see Him and hear His voice (1:14, 18).
- Yahweh had returned to Zion as He pledged, bringing an end to the famine of hearing His words – the famine which He'd imposed on His unhearing, disobedient people (Amos 8:11-14; cf. also Isaiah 28:1-13, 42:1-44:20; Zechariah 7:8-14; etc.). The silent centuries had passed since the prophet Malachi, and Yahweh was again among sons of Israel, speaking to them and calling them back to Himself. And yet, for all their hunger and longing to again hear His words, their ears remained stopped; hearing, they did not understand and seeing they did not perceive (cf. Isaiah 6 with Matthew 13:1-17; John 12:20-40; Acts 28:16-28).

Thus Jesus' words here formed a *double entendre* expressing a poignant truth: Until the day He presented Himself to Israel, no one could fault these rulers – or any Israelite of that generation – for not hearing Yahweh's spoken words or witnessing His manifest appearance. But now that Jesus was standing before them and speaking to them, His assertion (v. 37) became an *indictment*. Their eyes had witnessed Yahweh's appearance and their ears had heard His voice, but without perception and understanding. Moreover, their insensitivity in that particular encounter merely manifested their *innate* blindness and deafness; their inability to discern the Son exposed and affirmed their inability to perceive and hear the Father whom they believed they served as devoted disciples with fully attuned eyes and ears (cf. 8:43-47, 9:24-41, 10:22-31). The fact that they did not believe the One whom the Father had sent – the One who spoke His words and did His works – proved that they did not have the Father's word abiding in them (5:38).